

All Winners, No Losers

THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS ON ANIMOSITY & FORGIVENESS

by *Thānissaro Bhikkhu*

When you forgive someone who's wronged you, it doesn't erase that person's karma in having done wrong. This is why some people think that forgiveness has no place in the karmic universe of the Buddha's teachings, and that it's incompatible with the practice of what he taught. But that's not so. Forgiveness may not be able to undo old bad karma, but it can prevent new bad karma from being done. This is especially true with the bad karma that in Pali is called *vera*. Vera is often translated as "hostility," "animosity," or "antagonism," but it's a particular instance of these attitudes: the vengeful animosity that wants to get back at someone for perceived wrongs. This attitude is what has no place in Buddhist practice. Patience can weaken it, but forgiveness is what clears it out of the way.

The Dhammapada, a popular collection of early Buddhist poems, speaks of vera in two contexts. The first is when someone has injured you, and you'd like to inflict some injury back. The second is when you've lost a contest—in the Buddha's time, this referred primarily to military battles, but now it could be extended to any competition where loss entails harm, whether real or only perceived—and you want to get even.

In both cases, forgiveness is what puts an end to vera. You resolve not to settle the score, even if society grants you the right to do so, because you realize that, from the point of view of karma, the only real score in contests like this consists of more bad karma points for both sides. So, in forgiving the other side, you're basically promising yourself to forego any opportunity to add to the score. You have no idea how many lifetimes this particular karmic mud fight has been going back and forth, but you do know that the only way to end it is to stop the vera, and if the end doesn't first start with you, it may never arrive.

“He insulted me,
 hit me,
 beat me,
 robbed me”
—for those who brood on this,
 vera isn't stilled.

“He insulted me,
hit me,
beat me,
robbed me”—
for those who don't brood on this,
 vera is stilled.

Veras aren't stilled
 through vera,
 regardless.
 Veras are stilled
 through non-vera:
 this, an unending truth. — *Dhp* 3–5

Forgiveness is a stance you may have to make unilaterally, within yourself, but there is the possibility that the other side will be inspired by your example to stop slinging mud as well. That way, both sides will benefit. Yet even if the other side doesn't immediately join in the cease-fire, there will come a time when they lose interest, and that particular back-and-forth will die.

The Buddha recommends three tactics to help you deal with any lingering feelings that this strategy might leave you on the losing side, victimized without recourse.

- The first is to remember that we're all in the process of dying, and you don't want thoughts of vera to get in the way of a skillful death. The narrative that "He wronged me, and I won't feel at peace until I get back at him" is not one you want to focus on as death approaches—something it's doing all the time. Otherwise, you may find yourself reborn with a vera mission, which is a miserable way to live a life. You've got other, better things to do with your time.

- The second tactic is to develop thoughts of infinite goodwill, "free from vera, free from ill will." These thoughts lift your mind to the level of a brahma, a very high level of heavenly being, and from that heightened perspective the idea of trying to find satisfaction in settling old scores seems—as it actually is—petty and mean.

- The third tactic is to take on the five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, and no taking intoxicants. Ever. At all. As the Buddha notes, when you hold to these precepts in all your encounters with others, regardless of who they are or what they've done, you give universal safety from danger and vera—at least from your quarter—to all beings. And because that safety is universal, you enjoy a share of that safety yourself.

As for the case when you've lost out in a competition, the Buddha says that you can find peace and end vera only by putting winning and losing aside. To do this, you start by taking a good look at where you try to find happiness. If you look for it in terms of power or material possessions, there will always be winning and losing. If you gain power, for instance, others will have to lose. If others win, you lose. And as the Buddha says,

Winning gives birth to vera.
 Losing, one lies down in pain. — *Dhp* 201

But if you define happiness in terms of the practice of merit—giving, virtue, and meditation—there's no need to create losers. Everyone wins. When you give, other people naturally gain what you've shared with them; you gain a spacious sense of wealth within and the love and respect of others without. When you're virtuous, abstaining from harming anyone, you gain freedom from remorse over your actions,

